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Literary Graphology or the Meaning of Font in the  
Novels of William Wharton

{23} The level of fonts and their choice is seldom if ever the subject to discussions except possibly among compositors. The only reason for choosing one font rather than another in this instance would seem to be the application of quite a narrow set of rules which makes us use, for example, italics. Naturally, this does not mean that a reader pays no attention to font. Some everyday expressions reveal the fact that we do pay a certain amount of attention to that problem. We are often advised to read the small print in official documents or to italicise certain matters of extreme importance. In literary criticism we often meet italicised words meaning a title of a book.

Very often a cursory survey of a book tells us a lot about its content without the need for close reading any particular

part. A book printed in Gothic font is either very ancient or written in German, large letters inform us (if combined with illustrations) that the book is designed for children. The lack of pictures in such a case will designate the book as prepared for people who have problems with sight. The choice of fonts in advertising, for example, has an even wider application but this greatly transcends the subject of this paper.

The works of Albert du Aime known under his *nome de plume* of William Wharton give us quite a variety of material for the study of the use of different fonts intended as a meaningful part of the text. The present paper does not aim at any evaluation of the literary importance of William Wharton's works, its objective is to present an extra-literary technique, consequently applied by the author, and an examination of certain problems caused when the technique is rendered into another language. It is therefore advisable to present at least some of the theoretical background of such experiments as well as their practical application.

Any discussion upon the visual aspects of Wharton's prose requires a statement of the fact that Albert du Aime is first of all a painter and only then a writer. Writing has always been for him a secondary activity, and even now when his literary work has become the major source of income for his family, Wharton prefers to think of himself as a painter rather than as a writer. He is also still interested in combining his two activities - for example, he draws illustrations for his books, especially those which may be read by his younger readers. In his novel *Last Lovers* published in 1991, he intended to place pictures, the creation of which he had described in the

text inside the back cover of the book with following note addressed to the reader: "You imagined those pictures while {24} reading the book, if you want to you can see them now". Such edition has not yet been published, but William Wharton still intends to put it on the market.

Wharton's interest in connecting the visual and literary aspects of his artistic creation goes far beyond the level of illustrations. He graduated from UCLA with a painting major and psychology minor, but his special interest in visual perception led him, in the 1950s, to continue with serious studies in psychology at his university which ended in his doctoral dissertation entitled *Differential Visual Perception and Its Relationship to Certain Personality Variables* in which he tried to establish his personal artistic aesthetics. The research connected with writing the thesis, which was based upon the discoveries of Rorschach, included experiments carried on school children which brought about extremely interesting results. Du Aime created a colour code, each letter of the alphabet was assigned a specific colour. Texts for little children who were just learning to read were printed in the normal alphabet but with the use of the colour code.

The results of those experiments went far beyond any expectations - the children who participated in them not only learned to read much faster than other children of the same age group but soon mastered the colour code and were able to read texts written with dots in specific colours. In a private conversation, Wharton claimed that he did not have the time to propagate the colour alphabet, but, with the development of colour printing equipment the introduction of such

alphabet has become more and more probable. It should be pointed out that Wharton is not the first writer to dream of a universal alphabet; G. B. Shaw had a similar dream fifty years ago.

Until Wharton was unexpectedly offered a contract for the publication of *Birdy*, which later won the American Book Award for 1978, he had all but forgotten about the discoveries from his research. Albert du Aime had been writing since his early twenties but made no efforts to publish his works. *Birdy* was his sixth novel. Just like his five earlier works, it was intended to circulate in typescript copies among his friends; but thanks to one of them, it was handed over to a literary agent who arranged its publication.

Du Aime's initial idea was to have the book published in two colours, the part of the narrative belonging to Al was to be printed in black while the other part, Birdy's narration was to be printed in red. The publisher, Alfred A. Knopf of New York, refused. They claimed that it would greatly increase the cost of publication and consequently the price of the book, because many pages would have to be printed twice and printing in colour is generally more expensive than the traditional black. The compromise which was found was to print Birdy's narration in italics.

Later, the multiple fonts were widely used by Wharton in his novels. He claims that the introduction of various fonts allows him to cut out all unnecessary intrusions like "he said", "she said" or parts of narration which serve only as a means of establishing the speakers thus giving his prose a much faster pace. Also {25} the introduction of computers helped him

greatly in his search for the application of the multiple font. New programmes made it extremely easy to carry on such experiments, and Wharton may be the first of a long line of writers who will introduce the multiple fonts to their works.

The usage varies greatly in certain novels and the technique was not employed at all in some of Wharton's books. The differentiation has never been a mere ornament but always serves a purpose. In *Dad* and *Birdy* passages set in italics are dreams which gives an especially interesting effect in the case of the former novel. The narration of *Dad* takes places on three levels, the same events are related from the varying points of view of the son, father and grandfather; thereby presenting the differences between the generations and their perception of reality, as well as their mutual interrelations. However, when the narration leaves the plain of reality (just as it is in *Birdy*) the font changes into italics. If we point out the generally accepted habit of *italicising* the most important parts of the text, we begin to appreciate Wharton's approach to reality. A different font also separates those parts of narration which are accessible only to one hero; therefore, it serves as a sign that the reader is being allowed to participate in something very private.

The reader is not informed that the events described in italics are unreal; this must be inferred from the text, which adds to the participation of the reader in the mental activities of the hero. Wharton greatly surprised his Polish readers stating that in fact Al and Birdy are one and the same character. For the purposes of this paper, it is assumed that the reader realizes, that passages attributed to Birdy are in fact

Al's mad visions. Even at this stage, the level of form (as we generally perceive fonts in any book) overlapped to a great extent with the level of content – signifier melts into signified.

The fascination with the possibilities raised by the introduction of the multiple font found its peak in *Franky Furbo* published in 1989. Wharton went as far as to design special personal fonts for the novel. As he stated "print reduces human voice to the monotony of letters and he decided to break away with this monotony". The effect of his decision was the introduction of 14 fonts which not only characterised each of the heroes but further differentiated the languages they used within the novel.

The invention made the barrier between the form and the content disappear even further, because certain information about the heroes may be inferred exclusively from the choice of font or the similarities between certain fonts. Therefore, an extremely careful reader might guess that certain characters described as separate are actually one and the same person (which reminds of the situation described in *Birdy*). For example William turns out to be Franky. An even less careful reader should notice that before it is stated that Caroline is in fact Raethe, she starts in the beginning of the Eleventh Chapter to "speak" with the font ascribed initially to Raethe. Similarly the story told by Wilhelm in {26} the Ninth Chapter is (judging by the font) told actually by Franky Furbo. The number of such cases is greater and only very careful reading allows a complete understanding of this level of the text

As it might have been expected, the American publisher rejected the fonts designed by Wharton. However, the initial arrangement and interrelation between the fonts were retained, with the exception that conventionally available fonts were used rather than those designed by Wharton. This compromise was finally accepted by the author for both the British and Polish editions of the novel.

So far the last of the novels in which Wharton used his multiple fonts has been *Last Lovers*. Just as in *Dad* and *Birdy* a different font meant, for the reader, a voyage into the reality of the mind of the hero. In *Last Lovers* a special font means a voyage into the world deprived of light, the world perceived by the blind heroine of the novel. Mirabelle "speaks" with a special font, script similar to very elegant handwriting which is sometimes used for special texts like wishes written on Christmas cards or books for children. Therefore, before reading any words, a reader may form a mental picture of the heroine, just as in the real life one may evaluate a person speaking in an unknown language by the sound of his or her voice.

Just as in *Birdy* and *Dad*, a different font points out the thoughts or words which do not belong in the so called "normal" world. The use of a different font separates the words of Mirabelle from that of all other characters of the novel and stresses the chasm that divide her from the average world. Additional fonts are given to the letters written by the hero's wife and Mirabelle. The last choice of the font is explained by the fact that Mirabelle, in spite of her blindness, could write but only in capital letters.

To conclude we may state that the use of a separate font is, in Wharton's fiction (apart from *Franky Furbo*) a means of informing the reader in an extratextual way about the setting of certain passages of the narration. A different font in some novels is indicative of a narrative world accessible only to one hero. It always indicates an approach to the world that is different from the normal. An additional explanation is that one font means reality while the other font indicates dreams but this applies exclusively to *Birdy* and *Dad*, because in *Last Lovers* the thoughts of Mirabelle are placed in separate sub-chapters entitled "Blind Reveries".

The use of multiple fonts seems at first glance to create no problems to translators. The continuous changes from one into another of the fourteen fonts used in *Franky Furbo* require extremely good knowledge of the text from the literary editor of the book, but this seems to be the only problem. However, from the fact that the usage of multiple fonts is based upon the very simple system existing in the English language stem certain problems when the same text is to be rendered in a language in which the system is even slightly more complicated.

{27} Polish usage requires marking with italics foreign words which have not been accepted into the language. This rule is not absolutely unquestionable as some publishing houses do not follow it and in one case of the Polish translation of *Flaubert's Parrot* by Julian Barnes the whole book is set in the English way with italics used exclusively for the titles of books. However, the rule is most often adhered to.



The second Polish edition of *Last Lovers* tried at once to adhere to the choice of fonts made by William Wharton and to the rules of marking foreign language text accepted by the publishing house. This was possible in the case of all his novels previously published in Polish because in *Birdy* and *Dad* there are practically no foreign inserts in the text while in *Franky Furbo* the multitude of fonts made it virtually impossible to attempt any further subdivisions. Furthermore, the use of different languages in the novel was marked exactly by the choice of fonts. Therefore the few foreign words had to be set in the font representing the character and the language he or she used.

Theoretically, it would be possible to insert those words in the font representing one language into a text "written" in a different language that is set in a different font. However, on the one hand this would make any meaning of the fonts extremely difficult to trace, while on the other in majority of such cases the words in question did belong to the language signalled by the font. They were used in the "natural" language to further strengthen the impression of the text being written in a specific language.

Seemingly, such problems did not apply to *Last Lovers* with only two fonts used in the original edition. However, as the action takes place in Paris and the main heroine is French the novel is saturated with French words. Although Mirabelle's perfect knowledge of English is praised throughout the book, her utterances include a lot of French expressions. This ruled out the use of the script font because

this font does not exist in italics for the simple reason that it was created to imitate handwriting.

The first Polish edition of *Last Lovers* prepared by the Katowice publishing house Akapit in 1993, solved the problem by differentiating only Mirabelle's utterances with italics and setting everything else regardless of the language, in the Times New Roman font. In the 1995 Poznań edition, this simple solution was ruled out by the decision to set in italics anything spoken in French. It was therefore necessary to find a font for Mirabelle which would combine some characteristic of the script font and italics. The solution was found by the reversal of the initial assumption - anything uttered by Mirabelle was set in the new font in italics while whenever she used French words they were marked by the normal "straight" font.

Unfortunately, the final result was far below the expectations. The font chosen for Mirabelle is very similar when in italics to the italicised version of the font used for the main narration, it is therefore difficult to establish, at first glance, {28} who is talking, which was the initial aim of the use of the multiple fonts. Furthermore, any effect that might be achieved through the use of the script font is lost because any italics can not have the personal touch that a handwriting has. A perfect solution would be to disregard the rule of italicising foreign words and to use only two fonts as in the original version, but this would require a courageous publisher and such a compositor to carry out his or her requirements. The solutions which have been applied so far only superficially fulfil the requirements set by the author.

The remarks given above can in no circumstances exhaust the topic. It is still difficult to establish whether they present problems with which literary criticism shall have to deal in the nearest future or an experiment which will be soon forgotten along with its author. Regardless of all possible opinions pertaining to the literary value of William Wharton's works, it is nevertheless worth presenting and possibly discussing the literary technique applied consequently by the author and certain problems caused by it when rendered into another language.

#### Table of Fonts Used in *Franky Furbo*

1. Arial normal	narrator
<b>2. Arial Bold</b>	<b>Billy</b>
3. Times New Roman	William ( English)
4. <i>Times New Roman Italic</i>	<i>William (Fox language)</i>
<b>5. Times New Roman Bold</b>	<b>William (German)</b>
6. Courier New	Caroline
7. <i>Courier New Italic</i>	<i>Raethe</i>
<b>8. Times New Roman Bold</b>	<b>Franky (English)</b>
<b>9. Times New Roman Bold Italic</b>	<b><i>Franky (Fox language)</i></b>
10. Times New Roman 11	Germans, foxes
<b>11. Courier New Bold</b>	<b>Wilhelm (German)</b>
<b>12. Courier New Bold Italic</b>	<b><i>Wilhelm (Fox language)</i></b>
13. Times New Roman	Wilhelm (English)

**14. Times New Roman Italics13**

***The Tale***